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ABSTRACT

The work of the Placement/Progress Subcommittee for the City University of New York (CUNY) system is important. The Freshman Skills Assessment Program (FSAP) comprises one set of instruments used at two points and for two purposes: at initial placement in reading, writing, and math and later at exit from remedial programs. The CUNY Writing Assessment Test (WAT) and Mathematics Assessment Test (MAT) were developed in-house; for reading, the DTLS is used. This system is extremely powerful because it forms a major part of the foundation upon which articulation among the 17 colleges rests. It is of especially sharp concern to community colleges because of its effect on transfer. Faculty surveys at the various colleges revealed some patterns and problem areas. "Initial Placement" actually comprises two judgments. It determines whether or not a student is remedial; then it places the student in the appropriate course. The tests were found to be more effective in the first task than in the second. In the measuring of student progress, many campuses have developed exams or portfolios or other assessment procedures to be used instead of or along with the FSAP. These in-house measures have the advantage of a closer relationship to the institution's curriculum. The subcommittee came forward with a number of recommendations for initial placement and the assessment of progress: in each case they tried to balance the need for system-wide articulation with the desirability of responsiveness to locally determined curricula. (TB)

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Placement: Specific Needs, General Responsibilities

A paper delivered at the Forty-Seventh Annual Convention Conference on College Composition and Communication

28 March 1996

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George Otte has sketched for you a brief picture of why the issue of assessment is so critical. Its effect on students is tremendous. Its effect on institutions is equally profound. Around these two poles roil and tumble the twin issues of articulation and accountability.

In reviewing the work of the Placement / Progress subcommittee with you, I'd like to begin where we began, with the Freshman Skills Assessment Program (FSAP). The FSAP comprises one set of instruments used at two points and for two purposes--at initial placement in reading, writing, and math and later at exit from remedial programs. The CUNY Writing Assessment Test (WAT) and Mathematics Assessment Test (MAT) were developed in-house; for reading, the DTLS is used. Not really developed by design, this system nevertheless is extremely powerful because it forms a major part of the foundation upon which articulation among our seventeen colleges rests. Therefore, it is of especially sharp concern to community colleges because of its effect on transfer. The FSAP has been a major link, as well, between CUNY and the New York City high schools, partly because, as George has noted, the assessment measures have been thought to identify the need for work that was supposed to be pre-college, that should have been completed in their arena before students ever reached ours. It's important to note that, powerful as the tests are and wide-ranging as their effects may be, except for those who

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deal with them directly, the majority of administrators and faculty members are not actually familiar with the tests, and many have never examined any of them.

The Placement/Progress sub-committee itself comprised representation from nearly all of the colleges. Writing, reading, and math were strongly represented by faculty, some of whom have administrative responsibility at the departmental level--we deal directly with the tests and their effects. Members also included faculty from the disciplines and from career areas, as well as administrators--an associate provost and two institutional research people. Several members of the committee were seeing the tests for the first time.This varied membership provided a full, complex view of needs and perspectives.

After the subcommittee was convened, it soon became clear that we would have to wait some time--it turned out to be three months--for the Policy Subcommittee to send us guidelines. As we waited for the guidelines, we conducted a two pronged process of information gathering. First, the members of the subcommittee surveyed those on their own campuses who were in charge of administering the tests and the remedial programs, to determine how the tests were being used on each campus and the level of satisfaction there. Second, we invited the chairs of each of the University's standing Task Forces--Reading, Writing, and Math, as well as Professor Ann Raimes, who had recently chaired an ESL TASK Force that had produced a valuable report, to meet with us. These interviews, usually lasting two hours, provided historical and theoretical context for our deliberation. They also impressed upon us the complex and often controversial nature of our task.

The survey, although informal, was also illuminating. Over the years since the institution of the FSAP, a maze of developmental / remedial programs was instituted on each campus, usually augmented by ESL programs which although not by definition

remedial, have been governed by the FSAP as well. On some campuses these developmental / remedial programs are housed in separate "skills" departments called variously, Academic Skills, Basic Skills, College Skills. On others, they are part of existing English or math departments. Sometimes, developmental writing is taught in the English department but reading and math are located in a skills department. Each college has its own configuration, sequences, levels of instruction, and educational philosophy, and it is often nearly impossible to compare a course at one college to one at another. In fact, the sense of sheer arbitrariness can be overwhelming. The survey did, however, bring into focus certain patterns and problem areas.

"Initial Placement" actually comprises two judgments. It determines whether or not a student is remedial. Then it "places" the student in the appropriate course. The existing battery of tests is generally considered adequate for a rough initial determination of whether or not remedial/developmental work is needed, but less satisfactory for placing students at the correct level within the developmental sequences. In practice, campuses use a variety of strategies for determining placement, including combinations of reading and writing scores, interview and advisement, and retesting. Mathematics programs may consider grades on the state-wide Regents exams in math, but high school grades are not given weight in other placement decisions. The placement of ESL students generally involves more factors, including closer analysis of the writing test, consideration of the student's educational background and time in the country, and often an interview to assess speaking and listening skills.

Respondents expressed the least satisfaction with the assessment tests as measures of "progress," that is, as criteria for movement between levels or as exit from remediation. Many campuses have developed exams and/or portfolios or other assessment

procedures to be used instead of or along with the FSAP. These in-house measures have the advantage of a closer relationship to the institution's curriculum and often provide multiple measures that make decisions more informed and accurate. They are examples of the "variety of measures" advocated by the Chancellor's Task Force on Reading (Draft "Statement on Assessment," February 1992). Were it not for concerns about certification for the purpose of articulation, these innovations would probably be even more widespread.

As for the instruments themselves, it is the subcommittee's impression that, although each has limitations, there is a reasonable degree of satisfaction with the CUNY MAT (the MAT has recently been expanded to respond to long-acknowledged needs) and WAT as screening instruments. The DTLS appears more problematic, especially in placing ESL students, who make up a rapidly growing segment of the CUNY population. This suggests additional confirmation to the consensus noted by George Otte in his preliminary report "The Literature Search": ". . . current entrance examinations can only measure gross reading ability, not skills applied in the academic context."

In looking at policies regarding placement of transfer students, both those transferring from within the system and those coming from outside, the subcommittee found that, in general, only the assessment tests are given weight. At this time, no college surveyed considers developmental/ remedial courses passed on another campus when making placement decisions. Furthermore, courses in composition do not transfer unless the student also passes the CUNY Writing Assessment Test.

If the dissatisfaction with the DTLS as a placement tool is widespread, the unhappiness with the exit procedures in reading is even greater. A particular problem arises from the present use on most campuses of the "old" DTLS as the measure determining the

passing of reading. Nevertheless, colleges making the responsible decision to discontinue use of the old DTLS for exit from reading remediation need to be sure that their students will not be at a disadvantage when transferring.

In addition to their uses in determining students' language and math placement, the assessment tests have a further use. Every campus in some way, often drastically, limits the other courses that may be taken by students who have not passed out of remediation. Many colleges require that students be "CUNY certified," not only for mainstream English and math classes, but also before enrolling in second level and sometimes entry level courses in other disciplines and career programs. Others limit ESL, developmental, or lower level remedial students to a list of designated courses.

In the midst of all of this information, we became increasingly aware of the need for two kinds of information that we did not have. The entire apparatus of assessment and of the remediation programs that have grown up around it assumes a standard of performance, but this is nowhere spelled out. In an early piece, Mina Shaughnessy, who was instrumental in bringing about the university-wide testing program, cites as an important goal the "clear and stable articulation of performance criteria." While campuses have in many cases produced detailed lists of competence or instructional goals, the university-wide program --the more powerful component --has not. In fact, the performance criteria have remained tied to passing the FSAP without more refined delineation. Students who "pass" are not in need of remediation; students who fail are.

We also felt the need for more information about the results of remediation. The subcommittee lacked the resources to gather information on the subsequent performance of students who have successfully completed developmental / remedial sequences, e.g., how well these students do in the first mainstream course, retention rates, etc. [The

University has been conducting an extensive study of remediation, but findings were not available]. Nor did we have useful data that would help us to assess the effectiveness of various measures in predicting success in college. We are aware, however, that colleges have conducted extensive research which should be brought to bear on decisions regarding assessment. Clearly, this kind of information must be made available on a regular basis and assessment reviewed periodically in light of it.

In reporting to you the recommendations of the subcommittee, I am going to rely heavily on the wording of our preliminary report. Again and again as we worked, we became aware that our various responses to suggested wording signaled the points where we needed more discussion, and that in resolving concerns about wording we had found a way to consensus. Not very surprising, but nevertheless satisfying to a writing teacher.

Placement

First of all, despite its shortcomings, we affirmed the need for university-wide placement measures, saying: " Although historically, University-wide assessment for placement evolved as a response to the certification requirement at 60 credits, it has proven to be a useful tool that has value on its own and apart from issues pertaining to certification." However, we defined its purpose more specifically and more broadly: "The purpose of Initial Assessment is to develop a profile of each student, identifying both strengths and needs, in order to place students appropriately within the college curriculum and to provide essential support for students' learning." We also noted the institutional uses to which the data gained from assessment may be put.

We therefore recommended that the University continue its policy of initial assessment in reading, writing, and mathematics, and left the way open for colleges to assess other areas as they saw fit. We stipulated, however, that initial assessment in each

area not rely on a single test score but comprise multiple measures, including a procedure (the existing FSAT battery with modifications) adopted for general use throughout the University, with a minimum passing standard, and other placement procedures identified or developed by each college for placing the student in its own curriculum. Such measures might include high school grades, CPI Units, SAT scores, Advanced Placement or other courses completed, tests, portfolios, and other factors determined by the colleges to be useful.

Following the recommendations of the ESL Task Force, we concluded that assessment of ESL students should include the same elements required of other students, with the addition of components helpful in placing the students accurately. These additional factors might include interviews, informal assessment of speaking and listening skills, length of time in country, or first language literacy skills.

In considering the form of assessment, we felt the need to affirm the importance of using a writing sample to assess writing. Moreover, we recommended that the University attempt to find or develop a reading test that includes the use of writing to assess reading.

Progress

Recommendations for progress assessment, like those for placement, tried to balance the need for system-wide articulation with the desirability of responsiveness to locally determined curricula. As our survey had shown, college faculty have designed a variety of ways to assess the progress of their students because most remedial sequences correctly have goals that are broader than passing of assessment tests geared to minimum competence. College faculty feel the need to prepare students both more generally and more specifically for actual work that they will do in college. If curriculum is best determined locally, assessment should also be site specific. However, in keeping with the

University's nature and the need to provide articulation, performance standards must be elucidated University-wide.

Not only the purposes but the form of assessment to determine progress differs from assessment for initial placement. Once students have attended a college, the nature of the information available and needed for effective assessment changes. Progress, both within a remedial sequence and out of it, should take into consideration the performance of the student in the curriculum. At least part of the assessment, therefore, should relate directly to course work that the student has done (by means of a portfolio, specific examination, or some other form of demonstration that the goals of the course have been met). Moreover, the judgments of the teachers who have actually worked with the students and are most familiar with their performance should carry meaningful weight in next course and exit decisions.

Specifically, then, we recommended that progress assessment focus on the curriculum of the developmental/ remedial sequence and therefore shall be developed in the colleges, with primary responsibility given to faculty teaching the courses involved but with a carefully constructed system of oversight involving faculty teaching in other disciplines and career programs. Beyond this, campus-based consultation, since progress assessment has bearing on articulation and also on the question of who is a remedial student in the University, it should be guided by criteria promulgated and monitored by the University community as a whole. Guidelines shall be developed on the basis of what is agreed upon good practice in assessing progress.

As with Initial testing, the sub-committee recommended that multiple measures shall be used in assessing progress. Reading assessment shall be performance based; where multiple choice measures are used, this shall be in concert with performance based

measures that require students to write about what they have read. Writing assessment shall be performance based.

There is widespread belief that remediation does not "work"--students fail tests, drop out, are simply not ready, can't be made ready--and there is a corresponding urge to affix blame. CUNY inevitably has been the focus for much of this. A phrase like "Ability to do college level work " seems like a simple standard. In fact, it can be a barrier or an invitation. It can inspire a program that builds on students' competence while fostering engagement and new competence in academic areas. Conversely, it can relegate students to remedial ghettos from which only a small percentage escape. At every stage, the stakes for students are far higher than most of us had realized.

What constitutes "readiness" is poorly understood, although administrations, trustees, legislatures, and newspapers seem ever eager to determine who is not ready enough. Historical studies of English departments and of assessment have a sobering effect on presumptions of fairness, logic, and disinterestedness in this regard, reminding us that most often measures have been instituted to prove that prospective students are the right kind of person and that "right" is disturbingly in the eyes of the beholder. It was time, we thought, to sort out the myths from the reality--about language, about specific groups of students, about community college students.

Our goal, then was to bring faculty together, both broadly based faculty within institutions and discipline based faculty across the institutions and involve them formally and consistently in establishing and maintaining the understanding that must ground any directives about "articulation"--in a word, to make them, and not only students or "skills" faculty "accountable" for it. At the same time, we give far more authority to the faculty who actually teach courses in reading, writing, and ESL to devise ways to achieve the

standards.

In order to accomplish this, we as a university will need continuing support for research into the methods we use to assess and to prepare students. We will need support for students and for faculty development. Most assuredly, we will need collegiality. At a time when intractable problems strain the resources we have, when diminishing resources make us competitors, when change seems more often forced upon us than engendered within us, and when the past often beckons more seductively than the future, this last may be the hardest to achieve. Still, my experience with the subcommittee gives me hope that we will achieve it.